(c) what are the reasons for abnormally high visa fees charged by foreign Embassies in India; and

(d) what steps are proposed to ensure that Indians are not charged high visa fees?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI R. L. BHATIA): (a) to (d) Government has revised visa fees with effect from 1-1-1995. It is the sovereign right of each country to decide what visa/consular fees should be charged. In some cases there are bilateral and regional arrangement on a reciprocal basis under which visa fees are charged on a mutually agreed rate. The visa fees charged by India takes into account fees charged by other countries and the cost of service provided. The visa fees charged from Indian national by a foreign country is within the purview of the sovereign right of the country which levies the fee.

Hike in passport fees

5474. SHRI V. HANUMANTHA RAO: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Government have been increasing the fees for issuance of passports regularly;

(b) whether it is a fact that efficiency and public convenience has not inncreased correspondingly;

(c) what steps are proposed to link issuance of passports and fees charged, with the efficiency;

(d) whether Government would review the high fees being charged presently?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI R. L. BHATIA): (a) The passport fee was revised after a period of 15 years in July, 1993 keeping in view the increased cost of production.

(b) It should be noted that 17 out of 23 passport offices are issuing passports within two months after the receipt of the applications. The programme of computerisation is at an advanced stage and it is expected to be completed in all passport offices in the current financial year which will further add to the efficiency. Moreover, the passport offices are progressively being relocated in more spacious offices to upgrade facilities and convenience to the public.

(c) The passport fee is not directly linked to the time taken to issue of passports. The time taken by a passport office to process passports depends on various factors like the staff strength, infrastructural facilities, constant review of systems and procedures from time to time but is in no way related to the amount of fee charged.

(d) Since the fee is related to cost of service being provided and since the revised fee has been introduced less than two years ago, review is not called for.

Issue of machine readable passports

5475. SHRI V. HANUMANTHA RAO: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether there is a demand from some sections for issuing Machine readable passports;

(b) whether Government have conducted any study on the costs involved; and

(c) if so, what additional costs would have to be incurred by such new passports?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI R. L. BHATIA): (a) to (c) As a part of the process of continuously upgrading the security features in passport booklets, introduction of Machine Readable Passports (MRP) is under consideration of the Government. In this

context, the available technology and cost involved in introduction of MRPs is being evaluated.

India's participation in Geneva Human Rights Commission meeting

5476. SHRI G. Y. KRISHNAN: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state how far Indian delegation to the annual session of the U.N. Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) held in Geneva succeeded in blasting Pakistan's single-point agenda to include Jammu and Kashmir in its map and its malicious efforts to malign India on human rights and internationalising the Kashmir issue?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI R. L. BHATIA): Indian delegation to the 51st session of the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNHRC) held in Geneva from January 31, 1995, was successful in countering Pakistan's efforts to raise the Kashmir issue. The Indian delegation apprised the international community of the true facts of the case, particularly, the sponsorship and abetment of terrorism from across the border, in Jammu & Kashmir, an integral part of India.

Foreign mediation in Indo-Pak talks

5477. SHRI G. Y. KRISHNAN: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether Pakistan has rejected India's offer for holding fresh talks;

(b) if so, the terms set by it for holding the bilateral talks;

(c) whether India rejected these Pak terms;

(d) whether despite all this friendly approach by India, Pakistan ordered closure of the Indian Consulate General in Karachi in December last, in a bid to frame an alibi for their inability to bring peace in a city, rent by sectarian and potential violence;

(e) whether the U.S. Defence Secretary, Mr. William J. Perry, offered American help in mediating the Kashmir imbroglio during his recent visits to India and Pakistan; if so, Government's reaction thereto;

(f) whether the British Foreign Secretary Mr. Douglas Hurd, while advocating an early Indo-Pak dialogue on Kashmir under the Simla Agreement, storngly pleaded with Pakistan to end proxy war; and

(g) if so, what is Government's latest thinking on this crucial issue?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI R. L. BHATIA): (a) to (c) Pakistan has been raising at various times, certain conditions and preconditions pertaining to the ground situation in J&K for holding of talks with India. Setting of conditions and preconditions for such talks does not, in our view, constitute a positive approach. Government have repeatedly conveyed to Pakistan in the recent period our readiness to hold unconditional bilateral talks to address outstanding issues within the framework of the Simla Agreement.

(d) Pakistan's decision to close down the Consulate General of India in Karachi in January 1995 is based on propagandistic considerations, it is without justification and is yet another manifestation of its consistently negative approach towards bilateral ties with India.

(e) Pak leadership has from time to time sought mediation on J&K issue by various countries including the US. Government are of the view that all differences between India and Pakistan, including aspects relating to J&K should be resolved peacefully and through bilateral negotiations in accordance with the